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Governor William Bradford: The original founding father

Much has been written about Governor William Bradford. In this story I hope to show some of the lesser-known facts about the man, his character and his property.

William Bradford received a land grant in 1636 of "waste" land from Plymouth's Second Division of 1627, in which every man, woman and child, except servants, was allotted 20 acres. Bradford had received several land grants in previous years, so this was not based on the size of his family, which at the time was five, allowing him 100 acres. The governor had received grants in several different places, constituting much more than the allotted portion. In the words of one archivist, "It's good to be Governor." This grant was likely 40 acres, although no area was given and it was considered "waste" land. In the text of the grant, the reason given for Bradford getting the property was that it was close to his farm. The grant was away from the shore and Bradford later (1646) purchased the portion up to the shore from Constant Southworth, his stepson.

Governor Bradford's first wife, Dorothy, drowned shortly after the Mayflower arrived in Cape Cod Bay. Alice (Carpenter), who was with the Separatists in Leyden, Holland, left for Plymouth in 1623 aboard the Anne, shortly after her husband died. The story that Bradford had been a suitor of Alice Carpenter in England, and her family chose Southworth for her because of his aristocratic background, has been debunked by at least one biographer, James Shepard. Shepard wrote the book "Governor William Bradford and his son Major William Bradford" in 1900, and much of what I have to say about the governor is derived from reading that publication. Shepard was a descendant of Bradford and he relied on the writings of several authorities from the 17th century, men like Cotton Mather, G.M. Fessenden, Thomas Bradford Drew and Nathaniel Morton, among other authors who wrote into the late 1800s.

A descendant of Francis Drew who married into the Bradford family, Thomas Bradford Drew, gave the last remnant of the Bradford farm, which he had inherited, to the Society of Mayflower Descendants. Nathaniel Morton was the nephew of the governor, being the son of Alice (Carpenter) Bradford's sister Juliana Kempton. So early on in their pilgrimage Alice and William Bradford found themselves widow and widower in this strange land. They were married on Aug. 14, 1623 (kismet: Monty's birthday). Shepard points out that in the cattle division of 1627 (from which the 1627 land division is derived) there were 12 lots of 13 people each, which were "joyned" except in the case of the Bradford group where the word "joyned" was left off and the words "and those with him" were added after his name. The groups were composed of a family and others who were associated with, or neighbors of the family. Not so in the Bradford group. It read, "...fell to the Governor, Mr. William Bradford and those with him, to wit: his wife Alice Bradford, William Bradford, Mercy Bradford, Joseph Rogers, Thomas Cushman, William Latham, Mannassah Kempton, Julianna Kempton, Nathaniel Morton, John Morton, Ephraim Morton, and Patience Morton." The Mortons were Julianna's children by a prior marriage, and she was Alice Bradford's sister. Joseph Rogers, Thomas Cushman and William Latham were taken in as young orphans by the man who himself was orphaned before the age of two. The governor was brought up by first his grandfather William, and then by his two uncles. This, to me, shows what kind of man Governor Bradford really was. The rest of the group was "family."

In 1628 Alice Bradford's two minor children, Constant and Thomas Southworth, arrived and lived with the Bradfords. The governor's eldest son, John, also arrived in 1628 and the couple's youngest son, Joseph, was born in 1630. Of the 18 people living with William and Alice only six carried the Bradford name. The second Ruling Elder of the Colony was Thomas Cushman and the third and last was Thomas Faunce, both were of the Bradford family and training. There were times when the governor had as many as seven to 10 orphans living with him.

Governor Bradford was a well-educated and judicious man. At the age of seven, when he was in the care of his uncle Robert, who resided at Scrooby, he was sickly and was not given farm chores. He read from English and Latin books, probably provided by a neighbor. He devoted his leisure time to reading the scriptures. During his time at Scrooby he formed a close relationship with William Brewster, who became his closest friend and mentor. Between the ages of 15 to 18 he studied The Bible and attended the preaching of Richard Clifton, and became a Separatist. His family and friends strongly disapproved of his joining the outlawed church, but he clung to his views and became one of the foremost advocates of the removal to Holland, "...where they heard was freedom of religion for all men" (Bradford).

At the age of 18 Bradford was imprisoned with others at Boston, England for attempting to escape to Holland. Seven of the leaders were retained after most were released, and it is believed that Bradford was one of the seven. Bradford later reached Holland in 1609. While in Holland he apprenticed in the art of silk dyeing and then weaving Fustian cloth (a coarse cloth of cotton and flax, used to make corduroy, moleskin and velveteen). He did convert his estate into money, but the consumption of his estate he thought came to prevent a consumption of his virtue. In other words, he felt that spending his money made him less virtuous. He developed notable skills in languages; his Dutch tongue was almost as good as his English. He became familiar with French, Latin and Greek, but in order to more fully understand The Bible, Hebrew was what he studied more than anything.

After 10 years in Holland, he and the other Separatists removed to New England and Bradford endured the hardships along with the others. When Governor Carver died in that first harsh winter William Bradford was elected governor unanimously in 1621 and

1 of 3

served as governor or assistant governor for the rest of his life. He was elected governor 31 times, a fitting tribute for a man who devoted his life to the success of the colony. Although there were other Pilgrims who contributed to the establishment of a permanent settlement, without Bradford the colony would probably have failed, and there would have been little record of it since he wrote the history of the colony.

Nathaniel Morton had the use of Governor Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation," as did other historical authors of the period. Bradford's grandson, Major John Bradford, inherited the manuscript. Thomas Prince, Bradford's friend and former governor and assistant governor, later owned it. After writing his work on the "Chronological History of New England," Prince left it in the Old South Church with the rest of his library. Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the governor appointed by the king, used it to write his "History of Massachusetts Bay." When British troops occupied Boston prior to the Revolutionary War (1775-1776) Prince's library was destroyed. It was known that Bradford's manuscript was in the collection. The manuscript was given up for lost. It was later (1855) discovered in the Fulham library in England in the collection of the Bishop of London. It was copied and published in 1856, but it wasn't until 1896, 100 years after its disappearance, that it was copied (facsimile) and published. The original manuscript has since been returned to the state of Massachusetts.

Two notable quotes from Shepard's book: "Of all these things this is the record by the hand of our beloved father and founder. There is nothing like it in human annals since the story of Bethlehem," and "There is no other document upon New England history that can take precedence of this, either in time or authority."

The governor built a house on his "waste" land grant, probably on the portion he had bought from Constant Southworth for 12 pounds. The house cost "upwards of 34 pounds" and he gave it to his son John in 1649. There are those who say that the governor was not close to his eldest son; this seems to disprove that assumption. John Bradford sold the property to Christopher Wadsworth in 1664. The property then passed to Christopher's son Joseph and eventually Joseph's widow, Mary, and son, Samuel. In 1703 Mary and Samuel Wadsworth sold the property to Thomas Loring, who had also purchased the Tracey lot immediately to the south in the same year (see Stephen Tracey, Duxbury Clipper, Oct. 1, 2014).

The Bradford family moved from Plymouth (Kingston) to the Island Creek area and then to "Littletown" (the area near Tremont and Harrison Streets in Duxbury). Of Governor Bradford's four children, John and Mercy had no children; Joseph had three sons, but we only know of one, Elisha, whose wife gave birth 20 times with "only" 12 surviving. William, on the other hand, had 15 children. Lt. Samuel Bradford, William, Jr.'s seventh or eighth child married Hannah Rogers. She, with her three sisters, had inherited the Rogers estate from her brother John. The estate of more than 100 acres in Island Creek, which the first John Rogers had purchased in two pieces, had been passed down to the third John. Samuel bought out the other three sisters and that is how the Bradfords ended up in Island. Samuel's youngest son of seven children, the Honorable Gamaliel, who had 10 children, lived in Island Creek and his son Col. Gamaliel, who married Sarah Alden, moved to Littletown, possibly to be closer to the Alden homestead. Gamaliel and Sarah had three sons who settled in that area, Capt. Gamaliel, Daniel and Gershom. Their daughter, Jerusha, married Ezra Weston II (King Caesar II). Gamaliel and Sarah had four other children.

The biographer Shepard estimated that there were 50,000 Bradford descendants in 1900. I believe that is a conservative estimate. If you take that estimate and allow for four generations in the intervening years (using an average of 3 children – families of 5 to 10 in the earlier years and 2.5 in recent years) that would result in there being from 4 to 6 million Bradford descendants around the world. About half of them would not have the Bradford name and some would not know that they were Gov. William Bradford's descendants. This would not conflict with the estimated 30 million Mayflower descendants, remembering that many of the Bradford descendants were also Alden, Soule, Sampson, etc. descendants.

The Bradford Farm.

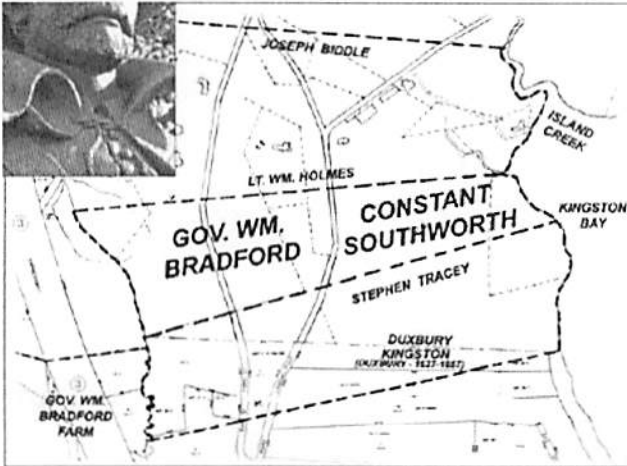
Governor Bradford, through land grants and purchases, acquired a substantial acreage in what was, at the time, the north precinct of Plymouth (now Kingston). This farm was sometimes referred to as the Stoney Brook Farm. The governor lived on the farm during the five years he was the assistant governor, and there is evidence to suggest that he lived there at other times too. I have shown on the accompanying map what I believe to be the limits of the farm, although I have not proven the boundaries as yet – you'll have to wait for my book for that.

Historian Emily Drew estimates the acreage as 226 acres; Historian Edwin D. Johnson as "about" 145 acres; and biographer James Shepard as "about 300 acres." So you can see the difficulty in fixing the area. In addition to his grants, Bradford acquired land from Thomas Cushman, Nicholas Snow, Thomas Willett, John Faunce, Stephen Deane, John Barker, Joseph Rogers, Stephen Tracey (probably), John Winslow, John Doane and Robert Hicks. A large portion of the property would have been "marsh meadow," as the property abutted the Jones River and Stoney Brook. There is a stone marker just east of Summer Street, near Foster Lane, commemorating the three generations of Bradfords who lived there. That would be the governor, his son William and grandson Major John Bradford.

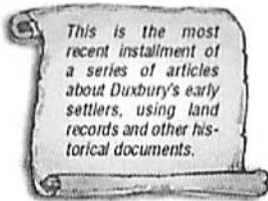
When the governor died in 1657, his estate was valued at 900 pounds, the richest man in the colony to that time. The second wealthiest man was Myles Standish, who died in 1656 and left an estate of about 400 pounds.

We should be thankful that such a man as Governor William Bradford was there to begin the American experience.

2 of 3



Creek.



This is the most recent installment of a series of articles about Duxbury's early settlers, using land records and other historical documents.

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BY LAMONT "MONTY" HEALTY



3 of 3